Conclusion

DICKENS AND THE DECLINE OF THE ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED NOVEL AFTER 1870

As the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in 1836 marked the rise of illustrated popular fiction in England, so Dickens's death in 1870 heralded its gradual decline. Paradoxically, the unprecedented success of Dickens and his original illustrations may have hastened the reversion of illustrated new fiction to its present pre-*Pickwick* status, and the technical, economic, sociological, and aesthetic conditions that fostered its rise also accelerated its degeneration. The advantages of illustrations had outweighed their disadvantages throughout the Victorian era for most novelists, as well as publishers, artists, and, above all, readers. In the twentieth century, however, in America and on the Continent as well as in England, illustrations tend to be regarded as more trouble than they are worth by these principals. Yet the recent revival of interest in Dickens's original illustrations, which had previously shared the fate of illustrated fiction generally, is encouraging. Whether present interest reflects nostalgia for the past, renewed scholarly interest in every aspect of Victorian England including Dickens, anticipates a new era of book illustration, or will remain an isolated phenomenon remains to be seen.

The world Dickens passed from in 1870, in contrast to the one he entered in 1812, was deluged with graphic material, especially illustrations for new fiction. As costly methods of reproducing drawings, etchings, and engravings yielded to cheaper photomechanical techniques, illustrations became increasingly accessible, in color as well as in black and white, and in daily as well as weekly and monthly doses. Publishers provided the public with a proliferation of illustrated fiction in one-volume hardcovers and periodical serials, which were beginning to drive out the shilling monthly parts and the three-decker novel. Eventually, however, illustrations for new popular but serious fiction, which Dickens's success had helped popularize, lost their novelty and no longer guaranteed higher sales.

As the twentieth century progressed, illustrated new fiction suffered from the decline of serial publication, which minimized publishers' risks, as well as from rising labor costs and competition from photojournalism, movies, and television. Now, as before 1836, publishers do not commission illustrations for the promising literary classics of the future, but for the established ones of the past—and then usually only for a limited luxury edition—and for children's books and for gift books that, like the old annuals and "keepsakes," are meant to be looked at rather than read. Illustrations may appear on dust jackets or paperback covers to attract buyers, as illustrations posted in book-sellers' windows used to do, but they rarely appear in the text itself; exceptions, of course, are comic strips for the near-illiterate which Gabriel García Márquez, for example, has termed the "apotheosis of the novel" (the illustrated novel, one might add). Even publishers who agree with William Morris that the illustrated book, because it combines so many arts and gives such pleasure, should "remain one of the worthiest things towards the production of which reasonable man should strive" know that his view is more idealistic than economically realistic.

That "the Dickenses of today may go unillustrated," as Lynton Lamb put it, "may not be a source of regret among contemporary authors." Most serious novelists no doubt would prefer to do without illustrations, even if publishers encouraged them, since in recent decades, as before *Pickwick*, the vehicle for fiction with the greatest appeal for the educated élite has been the unillustrated bound volume. Illustrations have usually been associated with serialized or short narratives appearing in popular but not intellectually prestigious magazines (themselves now defunct or in danger of extinction). Though Pearl Buck's second husband, as editor of *Asia*, included illustrations with most of his wife's books that appeared there before and after *The Good Earth*
(1931) in serial or complete form—as did Collier's, Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping and other less cerebral magazines—as editor and then president of the John Day Company, he never continued this practice in the subsequent hardcover editions. Similarly, Ernest Hemingway's novella, The Old Man and the Sea, first appeared complete in Life magazine on September 1, 1952, with blue-tinted drawings by Noel Sickle; for its debut in volume form, however, Scribner's, no doubt with the author's acquiescence, omitted any illustrations.

The nature of the fiction written by major authors after Dickens undoubtedly contributed to the demise of illustrations. Dickens's narratives lent themselves especially well to graphic representation; those of his successors usually did not. As George du Maurier summed up the situation by 1890: "If the disappointed author says to [his illustrator], 'Why can't you draw like Phiz?' he can fairly retort: 'Why don't you write like Dickens?'" For despite the fact that following the Pre-Raphaelites ut pictura poesis once again became the ideal of verse, serious fiction followed a different path. The naturalistic narratives of George Gissing, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy, for example, doubtless made imaginative illustrations inappropriate and realistic ones superfluous. The later introspective stories of E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, with their psychological plots, stream-of-consciousness monologues, and symbolism, together with the increasingly egocentric and abstract prose of their successors, still seem to render illustration virtually inconceivable. No wonder Harvey concludes that "in respect of illustration the modern novel has a withered limb." Even authors after Dickens, with comparable pictorial imagination and style, worried that illustrations would date, misinterpret, or in some other way limit their prose conceptions. Others openly feared competition from contributions to their books by another artist working in another medium. Henry James, for example, on whose youthful mind Dickens's first artists had perhaps made too indelible an impression, permitted his travel books but never his mature fiction to appear with drawings. He grudgingly admitted Alvin Colburn's photographs into the New York edition of his works only as frontispieces and only after reassuring himself that they would contribute in as different an aesthetic medium as possible, so that their reference to "Novel or Tale should exactly be not competitive or obvious." "Anything," James further explained, "that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being, while placed before us, good enough, interesting enough, and, if the question be of picture, pictorial enough, above all in itself, does it the worst of services, and may well inspire in the lover of literature certain lively questions as to the future of that institution." Similarly, Thomas Hardy increasingly excluded all illustrations from the collected editions of his novels except for photographic frontispieces and a regional map drawn by him. None of the first or standard editions of Joseph Conrad's fiction seem to have been illustrated in his lifetime, nor were any of James Joyce's, except for the extravagant edition of Ulysses, issued by the Limited Editions Club in 1935, with drawings and etchings by Matisse.

Furthermore most of the later novelists, whatever the content and style of their prose, would not have wished to spend endless hours with artists and illustrations. Lacking Dickens's enduring belief in the value of illustrations, they also lacked his energy, authority, and interest in coping with all the professional and personal aspects of collaboration with another artist. Leo Tolstoy, had he lived closer to urban art centers, might have proved an exception, to judge from his wholehearted involvement in the illustrations he commissioned (despite the advice of intimates) for War and Peace (1867-69) by M. S. Bashilov as well as those for Resurrection (1899) by Boris Pasternak's father Leonid. But few authors, if any, would have been willing to worry about their artists' egos, preferences, infirmities, or lack of experience, as Dickens did, not to mention the deadlines of engravers on top of those of publishers and printers. Consequently many authors became increasingly remote from illustrators as well as the illustration process. It is a suitable paradox that the one author who, in one period of his career, surpassed Dickens's professional involvement with an artist and the original illustrations to his work—even providing sketches for guidance—is far better known for his plays. Bernard Shaw's childhood ambition to paint surfaced not only in his early art criticism but in his later absorption with every aspect of the wood engravings John Farleigh provided for The Adventure of the Black Girl in Her Search for God (1932) and in Short Stories, Scraps and Shavings (1933). In our day, however, there seems to be no evidence to disprove Harvey's blanket assertion that "one does not imagine a novelist taking any interest in the illustrations of his work, if it has any illustrations." In such a discouraging atmosphere, it is not surprising that the remarkable nineteenth-century author-artists—Blake, Lear, and W. S. Gilbert, who illustrated their own verse; Thackeray, du Maurier, Greenaway, and Potter, who illustrated their own fiction; Ruskin, Rossetti, Hopkins, Beardsley, Whistler, the ubiquitous Morris, and the young Beerbohm, all of whom displayed (usually separately) verbal as well as graphic facility—left no reliable heirs, especially in novel illustration. Whether in reaction to the illustrated narratives of their youth, now commonplace, or fearful of
meeting the new aesthetic standards, even those authors with artistic skills revealed them sparingly, when at all, and rarely in their important works. They seemed to agree tacitly with Lewis Carroll, who, after himself illustrating the presentation manuscript of Alice's Adventures Under Ground, preferred to let a professional like Tenniel, in this instance, supply the pictures for the published version.18

Thomas Hardy, for example, though an able draftsman, willing to illustrate some of his published poems (though apologetically) and to instruct an illustrator with sketches, never supplied more than a map for his own novels.17 The versatile Samuel Butler, despite extensive training to be an artist, always separated his mature paintings from his important prose, as did that later iconoclast, D. H. Lawrence.18 Other novelists with graphic facility applied their talents sporadically when at all. The impulse that prompted young Henry James to take art lessons led to verbal, not graphic, “pictures” of people and places, and art reviews; Robert Louis Stevenson, despite prolonged holidays near the flourishing Barbizon painters in Fontainebleau, never reproduced his amateur landscape sketches in his lifetime; Kipling, an artist’s son, provided the pen drawings for his Just So Stories (1902) but did not follow further in his father’s footsteps; H. G. Wells was content to let his comic “pichuas” adorn only letters and presentation copies of books to friends, letting professional artists cope with those of his fictions that were illustrated; Evelyn Waugh put his brief art training to use in only one of his many novels, the Decline and Fall (1929); and Wyndham Lewis, who studied at the Slade School of Art, illustrated the fiction of others, but not his own.19

The situation abroad was no more encouraging. Although amateur draftsman Victor Hugo did not hesitate to supply frontispiece designs for some of his novels, a later writer like Thomas Mann might supply drawings as well as text for his proposed (but never published) Picture Book for Good Children but not for Buddenbrooks (1901), which was being written concurrently.20 In America, which never boasted a tradition of author-artists except in children’s fiction, writers with artistic inclinations have similarly separated, hidden, or disparaged them. E. E. Cummings, who considered himself an artist as much as a poet and an occasional fiction writer, published his art separately from his writings, except for one playful collection of stories (1930).21 William Faulkner refused to allow the later reproduction of the stylized illustrations of his university days, for in his maturity he displayed his graphic talents only to his family and close friends.22 In our day, Kurt Vonnegut defensively announces his compulsion to “scrawl pictures of a Nazi flag and an asshole and a lot of other things with a ‘felt-tipped pen’ rather than suggesting that he may be providing his own illustrations in Breakfast of Champions (1973) in order to break out of the strict bind of print.23

Book illustration, always an arduous craft, remained financially unrewarding for most artists, despite and then because of the plethora of illustrated matter in the decades after Dickens’s death, just as it had been before 1836. Even if a major novelist wished to publish his work with plates, and even if his publishers agreed to the extra expense, doubtless he would have had trouble finding an established artist willing to take on the work unless, like Dickens, he could persuade on grounds of friendship. There were few contemporary counterparts to Cruikshank and Seymour, willing to illustrate an unknown “Boz.” Many Victorian artists, as Graham Reynolds has observed, were “sturdy materialists” in their lifestyle as in their painting.24 No doubt they took heed when Cruikshank and Browne, among the first and most successful artists to earn a living largely from book illustration, died neglected and poor. Younger men continued to illustrate books and periodicals, but primarily to get started in more lucrative painting careers—the route followed by Marcus Stone and Luke Fildes. And newly established painters like John Millais could supplement their incomes better by illustrating periodicals, which paid higher commissions than did book publishers.25 Meanwhile, those artists content to remain illustrators could earn a more secure living by contributing to some of the many illustrated periodicals partly spawned by the fabulously successful part-issues of Dickens and his fellow novelists. And the situation has not changed greatly in our day, despite the decline of the illustrated magazine.

The illustrator of current fiction probably reached his highest status during Dickens’s lifetime, reverting gradually to his previous humble status after his death. When du Maurier was illustrating in the last quarter of the century, he was surprised and upset by an apparently unbridgeable gulf of snobbishness between illustrators and more traditional artists, and grieved that his dream of black-and-white art to rival painting would not be realized.26 The artist-narrator of Henry James’s “The Real Thing” probably spoke for most of his colleagues when he explained: “My illustrations were my potboilers; I looked to a different branch of art to perpetuate my fame.”27 Some painters, like Luke Fildes, paid lip service to du Maurier’s aspirations: “It may be said, scoffingly, that the Art of the Illustrator is but the Art of the Multitude. Be it so. But he who by earnest and sincere efforts, arrests, stirs, or gives pleasure to the many does good work, perhaps great work.”28 But the former illustrator declaimed from the security of the Royal Academy, the center of Victorian art patronage which,
Despite Dickens's best efforts in 1848 (CP, 1: 193), did not elect an exclusive practitioner of black-and-white art to full membership until 1956.\(^{39}\)

Yet a more élitist du Maurier prophecy, voiced at the beginning of the so-called golden age of English illustration in the 1860's, was validated in his lifetime. "A day is coming when illustrating for the million (swinish multitude) à la Phiz . . . will give place to real art, more expensive to print and to engrave and therefore only within the means of more educated classes who will appreciate more."\(^{38}\) In the 1890's this day arrived for at least a few gifted illustrators, who considered themselves designers and craftsmen as well, but its arrival had less auspicious implications for the future of illustrated popular fiction. Oscar Wilde was especially fortunate in securing for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* some designs for the cover and preliminary pages by Charles Ricketts, who also joined Charles Shannon in illustrating the short stories in *The House of Pomegranates* (1891); although the new fiction of most of his contemporaries was also often issued with plates, most of their artists are more obscure today.\(^{31}\) The most esteemed illustrators of the nineties—Beardsley, Walter Crane, Hugh Thomson, and E. J. Sullivan, to name a few in addition to the two aforementioned—generally seem to have put their most memorable efforts into editions of classic fiction and esoteric verse for intellectuals and collectors, or into books for children.\(^{32}\) The plates dominated the text, as they were designed to do, but their success undermined earlier traditions of book illustration, which depended more heavily on the integration of picture and prose and comprehension by a broadly based audience.

The status of the popular book illustrator was hardly higher abroad. In Europe, such artists were accorded even less prestige, as book illustration for the masses had never flourished there as it had in more industrial England. Leo Stein, impressed by the young Spanish artist he had met in Paris, commented in 1913: "Picasso is to my belief an illustrator by his gifts, one of the greatest who was ever born, but illustration in our day is anathema."\(^{93}\) When Continental artists like Picasso and Marc Chagall did do illustrations, not as an inferior but as an alternative and optional way of working, they were the real features in limited luxury editions of dead-authors, usually poets.\(^{34}\) In the United States, Andrew Wyeth refused to contribute a lithograph even to a book about his own works because he felt that the standing of his father N. C. Wyeth (1882-1946) as an original artist and painter had been irreparably damaged by his prolific book illustrating.\(^{35}\)

Ironically, the technical advances that made illustrated fiction so widely available in the nineteenth century doomed it in the twentieth, benefiting book illustrators far less than publishers, authors, and readers.\(^{36}\) Some illustrators profited from their steadier employment on periodicals or from the wider distribution and consequent popularization of their scenes, thanks to processes that reproduced more copies at less cost. But most found it harder to attract attention and all must have felt a diminished sense of public mission. It was harder to appeal to the more jaded imaginations of the increasingly sophisticated post-Dickens audiences, whose appetite for realism and information was better satisfied by photographs. And although the new photomechanical processes reduced discrepancies between the artist's drawing and the final reproduction, his lesser involvement both demoralized him and devalued his work. The late Victorian revival of more personal but anachronistic procedures, by Morris at his Kelmscott Press and especially by Ricketts and Shannon at the Vale Press and Lucien Pissarro at the Eragny Press, held as one of its aims a restoration of the union between an illustrator's conception and execution of his work; but this union, a necessity when Dickens was writing and Seymour, Cruikshank, and the young Browne were illustrating, has proved too costly a luxury.\(^{37}\) Moreover, whatever process is used, artists of all times and countries have invariably protested the quality of their reproduced designs. Virginia Woolf discovered this truth when her sister, Vanessa Bell, viewed the carefully wrought prints of her woodcuts for *Kew Gardens* (1919) and made a vow (not kept) never to work for the Hogarth Press again.\(^{38}\)

As if to compensate for their increasingly frustrating lot, some post-Dickens illustrators appear to have practiced a weird kind of revenge. Driven by technological developments and the taste of the times into the hands of the late Victorian "Art for Art's Sake" movement, which as Mrs. Leavis has noted, placed a premium on illustrations conceived as pictures in their own right, they became more self-consciously independent but less willing to help authors.\(^{39}\) Even before Dickens's death, in an 1868 article not written but certainly approved by him, *All the Year Round* observed that early Victorian illustrators had set an author's best scenes before the reader, whereas contemporary ones seemed more interested in representing scenes that would reflect their own abilities.\(^{40}\) Du Maurier apparently was atypical in wishing he had been able to consult Hardy more often for *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) illustrations to better portray his conceptions; in the same year, Trollope was bitterly complaining that "an artist will frequently dislike to subordinate his ideas to those of an author, and will sometimes be too idle to find out what those ideas are."\(^{41}\)

By the start of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of
the egocentric nineties, veteran G. S. Layard observed that
the average illustrator acted curiously superior to an
author's minimal requirements: "He either does not read the
episodes that he is called upon to illustrate, or, if he reads
them, he does not grasp their meaning, or, if he grasps their
meaning, the meaning does not meet with his approval. At
any rate, he constantly makes a hash of the whole thing."\
Whether such egocentricity was cause or effect, the notable
achievements of Victorian and early Edwardian illustration,
even before the devastating effects of the First World War,
were gradually petering out.

As in the days before *Pickwick*, the author of new
illustrated fiction, whether in book or magazine form, was
usually subordinate to, as well as remote from, his artist.
Shaw felt compelled to remind one of the most outstanding
illustrators of the 1930's that illustration involved much
more than "making a picture and sticking it into a book." The
continuing relevance of his admonition is reflected in the
following recollected interchange shortly after the Second
World War between Evelyn Waugh and the editor of a
popular magazine, who was publishing one of the author's
short stories with a single illustration.

'This illustration is by the very best artist in the
country.'
'What did you pay for it?'
'2,500 dollars.'
'But you could have got a real picture for that.'
The editor then said, 'What's more, this illustration is
about the story. Often they have nothing to do with it.'
'Why?'
'Artists as important as [Al Parker] are so busy they
don't get around to reading what they illustrate. Maybe
they have a secretary make them a synopsis. Then maybe
they get mixed. We can't control artists as important as
[Al Parker].'\

It seems clear that successful illustrators today are no
more willing than formerly to be "the ballyhoo guy to bring
people into the author's tent," as Arthur Brown, who
illustrated some of O. Henry's and Fitzgerald's short
fictions, has put it.

If the serious common reader in the century after
Dickens's death had continued to want his new fiction
illustrated, publishers, authors, and artists, whatever their
reservations, would have met the demand. But in the years
following 1870, English readers, now almost wholly literate,
were flooded with pictorial fiction, which first expanded the
tradition of novel illustration, as Mrs. Leavis has noted, but
ultimately impoverished its educative and amusement
value. Readers could absorb the realistic contemporary
scenes more easily than those of the earlier illustrators,
whose anatomical idiosyncrasies and Hogarthian subtleties
had provided previous generations with food for thought
and comment for extensive periods. Some readers, their
imaginations now besieged with images, more readily agreed
with Henry James that pictures, at best, were like a
"perpetual nudging of the elbow" which interrupted the
story and, at worst, were "impertinent" and "illicit" short­
cuts to it. Others preferred something left to their
imaginations in serious fiction or considered illustrations to
be juvenile. Indeed, children became the only fiction readers
for whom books were regularly illustrated. And even they,
when grown, sometimes apologized for their youthful
indulgence in them. In this vein, for example, Gertrude
Stein defensively recalled her initial exposure to picture
books, "but books all the same," she insisted, "since pictures
in picture books are narrative."\

Meanwhile, the technological advances that enabled illus­
trated fiction to reach such a wide public in the Victorian era
soon engendered other visual diversions, which cut down on
reading time. Competition from movies and television, as
well as increased travel opportunities, further encouraged
cavalier attitudes toward illustrations in fiction. Their
decline was consequently inevitable. Just as the vitality of
the eighteenth-century print passed into the illustrated
novel and the narrative painting of the Victorian era, so did
that vitality pass in the twentieth century into film.

Dickens's original illustrations have, on the whole, fared
better in the century since his death than most illustrations
of the period. Late Victorian publishers would not have
dared to issue his work without some plates—usually
reproductions of the originals, sometimes fresh designs by a
surviving original artist, or, occasionally, a new hand
altogether. Most late nineteenth-century readers shared
du Maurier's nostalgic recollection of Dickens's creations,
which for them had been "fixed, crystallized, and solidified
into imperishable concrete by those little etchings in that
endless gallery, printed on those ever-welcome pages of
thick yellow paper." As the century waned, however, so
did near universal appreciation of Dickens and his original
illustrations. Young Beardsley, like Whistler and no doubt
many budding artists of the period before him, cut his teeth
on subjects from the novels, but only to amuse himself and
his intimates in idle moments. Contemporary art histori­
rians pronounced the early Dickens illustrations "rubbish,"
the later ones inconsequential. When even an admirer of
Dickens as knowledgeable as George Gissing, himself a
novelist who had written a study of the author and edited
the Rochester edition of his works (1900–1901), confessed
that he only enjoyed a few of the original designs, publishers
must have realized it was time to call a halt. Accordingly, between 1916 and 1937, no editions of Dickens's collected novels appeared with the original illustrations. No one protested these unadorned editions and readers like C. S. Lewis would doubtless have preferred them, for he remembered Dickens "with a feeling or horror engendered by long poring over the illustrations before I learned to read."

Even as an adult, Lewis still thought Dickens's first illustrations "depraved" but Graham Greene perhaps best expressed the consensus of the Depression generation, whose scholarly interest in the author was beginning to revive though their distaste for the original prints persisted.

It would be well if we could forget the Phiz and Cruikshank illustrations that have frozen the excited, excitable world of Dickens into a hall of waxworks, where Mr. Pickwick perpetually turns up the tails of his coat, and in the Chamber of Horrors, Fagin crouches over an undying fire. His illustrators, brilliant craftsmen though they were, did Dickens a disservice, for no character any more will walk for the first time into our memory as we ourselves imagine him, and our imagination after all has just as much claim to truth as Cruikshank's.

Filmmakers, however, who adapted many of Dickens's novels in the 1930's and 1940's, did not share this view, relying heavily on the original illustrations for the appearance of their characters, costumes, and sets. The cinema (and now television), whose techniques Dickens both anticipated and influenced, have probably kept the author's name before the general public more than the novels themselves, thus preparing the ground for the subsequent popular revival as effectively as did the seminal essays of Edmund Wilson and George Orwell for the scholarly one.

Aided by publishers, literary scholars and students today realize, as did most of their Victorian counterparts, that Dickens's original illustrations are indispensable to a comprehensive understanding of his time and his texts, even if poorly reproduced, incorrectly positioned, or aesthetically uncongenial. Accordingly, editions of Dickens that reproduce the first prints—the limited Nonesuch (1938), the Oxford New Illustrated hardcovers (1947–58), the scholarly Clarendon volumes (1966– ), and the Penguin paperbacks (1965– ) have been or are still being issued. It may be that Dickens's renewed popularity has generated interest in everything related to his life and work. The original illustrations seem, however, themselves to have survived the vicissitudes of taste and time as well as the narratives they initially accompanied.

Even casual readers of Dickens have always recognized Pickwick, Fagin, and Scrooge in pictures, if not the names of the artists who first portrayed them. For better or worse, consciously or not, our conception of Dickens's work seems irrevocably tied to the representations of it by the artists with whom he worked so closely. Few Dickensians have ever permanently welcomed their re-creations by later artists, no matter how technically superior or aesthetically appealing. Indeed, it seems, as Percy Fitzgerald perceived long ago, that there is a curious mystery, or it may be finality, in this connection of original illustrations with the text, from which, bad, indifferent or good, they are not to be divorced. They have been engendered with it; they have come in response to the author's ideal; he at least has accepted them. They have been produced under his prompting and direction. Such are strong recommendations; but a more important cause for their acceptance is that the reader has come to know the characters and scenes in this shape. The newer designs have no authenticity, and are distasteful because strange.

A modern reader's claim that he "would disembowel anybody who proposed a Dickens with any except the original illustrations" is a crude but increasingly representative opinion in our day. The most powerful and enduring reason for our cherishing Dickens's original illustrations, however, may well be our recognition that the remarkable confluence of history, technology, and personality that made them possible is unlikely to occur again.